

## Followership, Hierarchies and Communication: Achieving or Negotiating

### Buy-in within the Public Sector?

Cranston City Council is a large public sector organization based in the UK, which provides a range of public services for the local area. It operates within a difficult and ever changing environment, with multiple internal and external stakeholder pressures and regulations with which to deal while delivering high quality services to local residents. The council employs ten thousand individuals, the majority of whom are based at its central offices. However, many employees work off-site on a regular basis conducting visits to local sites and residents. The council is hierarchically structured with numerous levels of management and reporting lines spanning its many service areas and functional departments. Interaction between organizational levels is somewhat restricted by predetermined channels of communication, overreliance upon emails, and top-down briefings with those who are running the council. Increasingly important is the need for the council to gain employee support and engagement.

Cranston City Council has experienced severe financial pressure stemming from the centralized governmental environment in which it operates. Budget cuts have been made which directly impact the resources that are available to deliver local services. Multiple rounds of budget cuts have led to three major lay-offs over the last two years. Employees are now speculating about the possibility of further redundancies. Rather than find new ways to deliver services to the community, workers spend valuable time speculating about the possibility of further staff reductions while passively resisting change.

Recently, the council has been subjected to an increasing number of external regulatory reviews because of issues regarding its service delivery; issues which are regularly reported by the media. For example, an entire row of council flats had to be evacuated when a water main burst – much of the infrastructure in the town is over 100 years old – and crews were unable to restore water for over a week. This incident even made a brief appearance on national television news. For all these reasons, employee engagement and morale are at an all-time low.

One response to the recent situation has been the formation of a change management team tasked with implementing changes to the ways in which the council's service areas and functional departments are operating. The chief executive and her senior management team selected long standing employees from different levels within the council who had significant experience and expertise which they could contribute. A few external specialists were also hired from an internationally recognized consulting firm to provide the team with expertise on how to plan, conduct, and evaluate a change management program. The team faces a number of additional challenges other than employee morale and engagement. First, because of the imminent budget shortfall, the team only has a short time to conceive and implement significant change across this highly diverse organization. Second, there is expected to be scrutiny of the changes by all stakeholders including council executive, employees, media, and residents. Finally, the team is broad and diverse – both in skills and experiences – and, as such, they have struggled to agree on a best course of action.

They have plotted out three broad strategies for determining what change management projects to introduce: 1) service reviews in targeted areas of high cost,

value and volume, including exploration of alternative service delivery methods, such as outsourcing delivery to other providers; 2) functional department reviews, including consideration of centralizing or merging the work done by Information Technology, Finance, and Human Resources employees; and 3) work process reviews, including the introduction of technology, to enable more efficient service and function delivery. The chief executive informed employees about the formation of the change team via a brief organization-wide email. She explained the importance of the team's work in responding to the council's current challenges and asked for employee participation.

The change team has held several meetings in the different service areas and functional departments of the organization. The meetings have been variously received with some workers adamantly opposing any change and others recognizing the need. Recent briefings were held to outline the third strand of the change management program, and to stress the importance of introducing or extending the use of technology to improve current work processes. All employees were expected to attend one of the briefings and had been asked to sign up for a preferred date and location. However, attendance at the briefings has been poor and comments made by employees who were present reflected feelings of concern and low morale, as well as frustration and anger. One employee was overheard saying, "It feels like the goalposts are always changing. It's different every day and they haven't got a clue what they're doing." Although they attended the briefing, others seemed to be unengaged. For instance, one such employee commented, "Well if they can't be bothered to ask for our ideas on how practically we can make more use of technology, then to be honest I can't be bothered either." In a similar vein, another employee said, "How can they expect us to be engaged with the proposed changes if they don't allow us to have any

real say in the change management decisions?” A small minority of the audience did engage in discussions with the team, asking challenging questions and proposing additional aspects to be considered, which were noted by those presenting the brief.

After one of the briefings, Martin, a middle manager in the Finance Department, decided to hold a meeting with his own team to hear their thoughts and to discuss any questions or concerns they may have. During this meeting, individuals made several suggestions that would be useful technology-based replacements for the department’s working processes, and so he decided to email these to the change management team. However, shortly after sending his message, Martin received a response thanking him for his suggestions, but informing him that the team had already drawn up change plans with which they would be moving ahead. Upon updating his own team of the response, Lorna who had actively given ideas to Martin commented, “Oh well, you know how it is in this organization. You can have your say here, but try and get it any further up and you’ve got no chance”.

### Scholarly Commentary

This case study provides insight into the complexities of achieving and negotiating buy-in to change within large UK public sector organizations. Giving a particular focus on communication and organizational change, we offer two ways of interpreting the case. The first perspective builds on Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera and McGregor (2010) and similar studies that explore followership as a process of (unequal) partnering with leadership (Carsten & Bligh, 2008). The second perspective challenges the often assumed role of leader power and control (Collinson, 2008; Tourish, 2014) to give a more critical reading which acknowledges “the complex, interactional relationships between leaders and followers” (Collinson, 2008: 369).

## **A Psycho-Social Perspective on Constructions of Followership**

A psycho-social perspective focuses attention on followers' constructions of leadership (Meindl, 1995) and of followership (Carsten et al., 2010). Studies from this perspective consider the diverse meanings followers give to followership (and leadership) and explore how these meanings are shaped by an individual's cognitive and social schema, and by the contexts in which the individual is embedded (Meindl, 1995; Carsten et al., 2010). Both schema and context influence how followership is socially constructed and how the follower role is enacted (Carsten et al., 2010). Therefore, followers hold different schema of followership, ranging from followership as subordination, reinforced by social constructions of hierarchy in terms of status inequalities and power differentials between levels (Carsten et al., 2010), to more active, and indeed proactive, schemas which may lead followers to construct and enact their role with leaders as partners (Carsten et al., 2010; Chaleff, 1995) or collaborators (Rost, 2008).

When applied to the case study, rather than relegating followers to a passive role of conforming to organizational change, as traditional leadership approaches might suggest (see Van Wart, 2011), the psycho-social perspective proposes the need to examine *both* leader and follower behaviors and processes in order to understand this important partnership (Carsten & Bligh, 2008). Partnering might include discussing the need for change and co-creating, monitoring, and evaluating the change strategy and implementation plan which Carsten and Bligh (2008) recommend for achieving active followers' buy-in to an organization's vision. Hurwitz and Hurwitz (2009) also advocate followers as active partners in a relationship. Their generative partnership model (Hurwitz & Hurwitz, 2015) includes key leadership and

followership communication behaviors of, respectively, *cascade communicating*, i.e., keeping team members informed and stimulating the right followership initiative, and *dashboard communication*, i.e., keeping your partner well informed and stimulating the right leadership action.

Public sector organizations have undergone significant structural changes in recent years (Pederson & Hartley, 2008), including reducing top-heavy management levels. However, Cranston City Council's hierarchical structures seem to pose difficulties in achieving follower support, with communication-specific issues including poor attendance at briefings, as well as lack of interaction and engagement with the change management team. Collinson (2008) discusses how followers may oppose leader-initiated change programs because they construct leaders as being out of touch with organizational realities. In hierarchical terms, Martin can be construed as a proactive leader, but also as a proactive follower who attempts to actively influence [his] leaders through constructive challenge and upward communication in an attempt to advance positive change in [his] department (Carsten et al., 2010). As Carsten and her colleagues (2010) and Collinson (2008) discuss, such proactive followership behavior is consistent with Chaleff's (1995) notion of courageous followership, which involves enabling followers to voice constructive criticism, particularly if they believe the leader is not acting in the organization's best interests. From a follower perspective, we interpret Martin's behavior of engaging with the change management team by putting forward his team's suggestions as an act of courageous followership. However, the management team's response to his proactivity, and the organization's structural conditions, may cause Martin to re-construct his understanding and resultant behaviors of followership (and leadership) to become more passive (Carsten et al, 2010).

This partnership perspective on followership and leadership, therefore, emphasizes the ways in which leaders communicate change and involve followers, enabling multidirectional communication throughout (Carsten & Bligh, 2008). By encouraging followers to voice disagreement and to pose alternative suggestions, followers can become innovative implementers of change (Michaelis, Stegmaier, & Sonntag, 2010) rather than resisters of it. The perspective might suggest that resistance is due to a lack of achieving follower buy-in (Carsten & Bligh, 2008) due to ineffective communication. However, rather than seeing communication with others as tools to be used within a change process, April (1999) argues that change is a social construct and that communication, conversation, and dialogue are the contexts in which change occurs. This perspective, which focuses attention on how leadership, followership, and change occur in a context of human social interactions, which constitute and are constituted by communication (April, 1999) offers a more nuanced perspective on the complex, interactional nature of follower and leader relationships, as suggested by researchers such as Collinson (2006, 2008) and Tourish (2014) whose work we now consider.

### **A Communication-Based, Process Perspective on Followership**

Langley and Tsoukas (as cited in Tourish, 2014) describe process perspectives through which followership and leadership are understood as being constituted by complex, ongoing, interaction processes among organizational actors. Studies from this perspective explore how meaning making is done together through interacting, communicating, and interpreting the actions and responses of individuals in a given context (McNamee & Hosking, 2012). Therefore, whereas existing studies conducted from the first perspective might focus exclusively on followers (e.g. Carsten et al.,

2010; Meindl, 1995), process perspectives consider the practices of followers and leaders as inextricably linked, mutually reinforcing, and shifting within specific contexts (Collinson, 2008; Hurwitz & Hurwitz, 2015) and regard meanings as emergent, fluid, and potentially contested (Tourish, 2014). Such perspectives often focus attention on the dynamics of power, control, and communication of followership and leadership (Collinson, 2008; Tourish, 2014).

From his process- and communication-oriented perspectives, Tourish (2014) understands leadership (and followership) as a fluid process centred on the interactions and communications of organizational members. He suggests that research from the perspective discussed above tends to locate power and control with leaders rather than followers (Tourish, 2014). Our reading of the social constructions on followership literature supports Tourish's claim that asymmetrical power is taken for granted. For instance, Carsten et al. (2010) suggest that followers may be reluctant to pass negative information upwards because of a perceived lack of power. In a similar vein, Carsten and Bligh (2008) state that promoting follower participation in the vision creation process requires that leaders relinquish some of the control that they have over processes and procedures. Hurwitz and Hurwitz (2015) however, believe that process and procedures are fundamental to leadership. Rather than taking away control, engaged followers add meaning and content. In other words, rather than acting on followers, leaders need to appreciate that they act collaboratively alongside them (Tourish, 2014).

As communicative processes (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Tourish, 2014), theories of leadership and followership acknowledge the productive potential of dissent (Tourish, 2014). Although advocating and seeking agreement on particular



perspectives are important, formal leaders should value followers' critical ideas (Tourish, 2014). Collinson (2008) suggests followers' demands for greater information, accountability, and openness, which he refers to as strategies of resistance through persistence, may be relatively effective in achieving change. Collinson discusses how followers may psychologically withdraw if their attempts to voice suggestions are ignored by those in leader positions. Collinson refers to such a response and related behavioral changes such as restricting effort and communication as "resistance through distance" (p. 318). This highlights the need to look beyond verbal communication to wider practices including non-verbal gestures (Talley & Temple, 2015), silence (Tourish, 2014), and doing nothing (Collinson, 2008) through which followers can undermine change initiatives. Therefore, in cases of resistance through persistence or distance, followers are active, powerful players in the leadership process and not passive, compliant, obedient sheep at the mercy of their leaders (Bligh & Kohles, 2009).

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What are the similarities and differences in understanding the role of communication in change from the psycho-social and process perspectives on followership?
2. What role does Cranston City Council's public sector context play in the followers' constructions of their role and in their followership behaviors? Discuss the ways in which hierarchical structures and leadership styles may be influencing passive, active, or proactive social constructions of followership within Cranston City Council. Compare and contrast these influences in your own organization.

3. Given Cranston City Council's hierarchical structure, what are the communication challenges in achieving follower buy-in to the changes and how might their impact be minimized?
4. How might mutual partnership between leaders and followers be negotiated in Cranston City Council, and in your own organization?
5. What examples of resistance through persistence and resistance through distance can you see in the case study?
6. From psycho-social and process perspectives on followership, in what ways might Lorna's comment be interpreted differently? How might she adapt her behavior in the future?

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